

In the name of God the caring the most kind

Seventy ways of enhancing interfaith relations, friendships and networks

*The second Peter Bell memorial lecture, Delivered on 16 March 2011 by Dr. Musharraf Hussain
OBE, DL, under the auspices of Concord Interfaith Fellowship, Leeds*

Dr Peter Bell was the general Secretary of the Leeds Concord Interfaith Fellowship: he was an outstanding teacher and pioneer in the field of interfaith dialogue, a man dedicated to creating a just and peaceful multi-racial society. As a Methodist lay preacher he was keen to foster better understanding of other religions, described by his friends as “a man of faith with a deep knowledge and understanding of the many and varied layers of immigration into the city of Leeds”. It is with sincere gratitude for the devotion and commitment of Dr. Bell to interfaith work that this lecture on “Seventy ways of enhancing interfaith relations, friendships and networks” is dedicated. By championing the cause of interfaith Dr. Bell was demonstrating the openness and the willingness of the Methodist tradition.

The prophet of Islam said “He who does not thank people cannot thank the Lord”. It is imperative that we remember benefactors who have worked hard to improve human relations. Once, whilst teaching his disciples, the prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) said “When a person dies his works stop except for three things that continue even after his demise to earn him Divine grace they are: charity, knowledge and offspring who pray for him”. The prophet is advising us all how we could leave behind a legacy that will make this world a better place.

In my lecture this evening I want to focus on two aspects of interfaith work: first, that the religion of Islam motivates Muslims to be caring and respect all human beings and secondly I want to celebrate the plethora of diverse and ingenious ways of the interfaith enthusiast in Britain, hence the title of my lecture “Seventy ways of enhancing interfaith relations, friendships and networks”. For me interfaith work is not just a talking shop nor a place of mere dialogue but a means of developing human relations, characterised by lasting friendships, partnerships and networks based on trust that creates a truly caring society. Something at the heart of Dr. Peter Bell’s vision for Leeds. Let me begin with how Islam motivates its followers to engage with others.

In Islam rights are of two kinds: the Divine rights and the Human rights. Divine rights include strong faith in the Lord and worshipping Him. Humanity is described as “God’s family” and thereby Human rights are sacred. The Qur’an whilst repeatedly telling the believers to worship the Lord emphasizes the respect for Human rights and vigorously promotes these rights and good relations. The Qur’an teaches four principles for enhancing good relations and friendships, they are: the equality of mankind, mutual understanding, cooperation and friendship. These principles underpin the development of relationships and interactions amongst people. Here we will examine these principles to show how the Qur’an encourages Muslims to adopt them.

Equality not discrimination

The glorious Qur’an says: *“O men! We have created you all out of a male and female and have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another”*

(Hujarat: 13) The classical commentators interpret a “male” and a “female” as “we have

created you from a mother and a father” “implying that this equality of biological origin is reflected in the equality of human dignity common to all” (M Asad: the Message of the Qur’an Pg. 904). The Qur’an also highlights the criterion for dignity as being piety the God consciousness and awareness of others rights. This concept of equality of mankind is given a legal status in another verse: *“There is no compulsion in religion”*. God has given mankind the freedom to choose his religion. Archbishop Carey very rightly asks “are we really ready to build our relations on equality? Are we willing to give others the right as we expect for ourselves?” Another interesting verse is this one: *“Unto everyone of you we have given a different law and a way of life. And if God had so willed He could have made you all one single community”*. (Maida: 48). This makes it absolutely clear that the different religions are part of the divine plan, who are we to object it? Within this diversity is human unity. This verse further highlights the inclusive nature of Islam.

Mutual understanding not disengagement

I think the following verse of Ale Imran is a clear invitation to understand about one another, it’s an invitation to discover our commonalities. *“O people of the book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but God, that we associate no partner with him, that we should not appoint from among ourselves lords and patrons other than God”* (Ale Imran: 64).

Professor Faruqi points out “There can be no cooperative endeavour without consciousness of the common base and shared purpose. The general awareness of Muslims and Christians ought to be developed until the truthfulness of the common base and moral desirability are recognised”. As far as Muslims’ understanding of Christians is concerned there are some misunderstandings for example: Colonialism, Christian missionaries and Orientalists. Muslims must make distinction between excesses of these and Christianity; these western activities and Christianity are not the same thing. This will go a long way in helping Muslims better understand their Christian friends. Similarly, the Christians awareness of Muslim concepts of prophethood and Jihad, status and role of women will help Christians overcome the misunderstandings about Muslims.

Co-operation not conflict

The Qur’an lays down a principle with regards to this when it orders *“And co-operate in matters of righteousness and piety”*. (Maida: 2). There are many fields of activity where Muslim and Christians can work together for example: provide spiritual guidance; reconnect humanity to their creator, develop God-bound consciousness; promote development of moral values in the society at large; Support the family institution; rejuvenate traditional marriage; re-educate young about the rights of parents; tackle problems of divorce and domestic violence; help modern man to cope with materialism and consumerism thus achieving a balance between worldliness and the thoughts of the hereafter; raise voice against the neo-colonialism and the wars it wages on humanity e.g. war on Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine etc. Help in the relief of world poverty and development of sustainable societies particularly in Africa; support the asylum seekers and the refugees. Muslims and Christians are best suited to helping the post-modern society. We as believers have the know-how, the tools and the teachings, which can guide mankind in these fields. The crucial question however is how? And who will bring this about? Perhaps Christian – Muslim forum?

Friendship not Hatred

A friend is a person with whom one enjoys mutual affection and regard. There are many levels of friendship, from intimate friendship to mere acquaintance mere knowledge of someone. The four levels often used in Tafsir books are:

- Muwalat - intimate and very close friendship
- Muwasat – sympathetic relationship
- Madarat – to show regard and courtesy
- Muamalat – purely economic or professional relationship

A verse that is often quoted as evidence against making friends with Christians and Jews is verse 51 of Surah Maida: *“O believers do not take Jews and Christians for your allies”* Muhammad Asad says “ This prohibition of a ‘moral alliance’ with non Muslims does not constitute an injunction against normal, friendly relations with such of them as are well disposed towards Muslims”. Remember these verses were revealed at a time when the nascent Muslim community was under enormous tensions with other people, the Jews in particular. However in Surah Mumtahinah, a much later madni Surah, the Qur’an predicts *“It may well be that God will bring about mutual affection between you and some of those whom you now face as enemies; For God is infinite in his power and God is much forgiving a dispenser of grace”*. (Mumtahinah: 7).

And how true was this prediction in later Islamic history when we see excellent relationships between Jews and Muslims and Christians and Muslims. As religious leaders it is imperative we develop friendship that grows beyond just a dialogue. This will send a positive message to the whole society. The Qur’an says *“... You will find nearest in affection to (Muslims) are those who say, ‘We are Christian’ since amongst them are priests and monks who are not arrogant. When they listen to that which was revealed to the Messenger, you will see their eyes fill with tears as they recognise its truth” (Maida: 82)*. This verse praises the Christian priests and monks and describes their friendly nature towards the Muslims. In conclusion the Qur’an is encouraging Muslims to develop these virtues so that they can build harmonious relationships with others.

The second part of my lecture is about celebrating the myriad ways of interfaith work. Dr. Elizabeth Harris in the first Dr. Peter Bell memorial lecture described the mood of the Christian community, about interfaith as “scepticism and resistance” she recalls how distressed her father was when he learnt that she was going to Sri Lanka to study Buddhism. Another Christian friend told her that she would pray for her as she was at risk from demonic influences, and presume that the Muslim mood was no different. How reassuring and refreshing it is today just two decades later that the head of Church of England, the Archbishop of Canterbury, exhorting his faithful “The time is right for Christians and Muslims to develop strong and committed relationships.” We will see how admirably Christians and people of other faiths are all working towards this wonderful goal, my survey of interfaith activities reveals the breadth and the depth of the endeavours of thousands of people striving to build positive relationships and networks.

What can you do?

I begin with the work of the Christian Muslim forum, an organisation I had privilege of serving as a president and later as a chairman. The aims of the forum are:

- To weave a web of open, honest and committed personal relationships between leading Christians and Muslims.
- To encourage shared reflections on the spiritual, ethical and practical values of the two traditions in order to offer resources for citizenship in our society.
- To develop channels of communication to help Christians and Muslims together to respond to events which test our relationship.

1. Be prepared to move out of your comfort zone. Interfaith work is really challenging and requires taking risks, clearly showing that interfaith work is not a soft option
2. Make your own personal and public commitment ...
3. Read the scriptures of another faith and then share what you have read with people of your own faith.
4. Invite someone of another faith to your home
5. Open up our places of worship - invite someone of another faith to your place of worship/religious community and give them the opportunity to observe/experience your religious practices
6. Share scriptural discussions with people of other faiths (e.g. Scriptural Reasoning)
7. Make a charitable donation to a charity operated by people of a different faith
8. Run an inter faith study/event at your place of worship/religious community
9. Talk about your friendships with people of other faiths with your congregation/religious community and report back whenever you attend an inter faith event
10. Give a copy of your scriptures to a friend of another faith (but not with the intention of converting them)
11. Involve yourself in the religious observance of another faith (but without compromise or syncretism)
12. Listen to what women of your faith or another faith are saying about inter faith engagement (and include them).
13. Speak up on behalf of each other
14. Dialogue with secularists, humanists and atheists

What can organisations do?

15. Organise seminars, conferences and workshops for interfaith dialogue
 16. Run religious literacy training programmes for private and public sector
 17. Provide speakers for schools, colleges and universities to speak about your faith
- Organise mosque open day in your area

What can the government do?

The Government supports interfaith projects since it believes that social harmony can be increased if religious communities are empowered.

18. Provide encouragement in form of financial support, grants and sponsors for projects promoting community cohesion.
19. Lobby for change in law. The Northern Ireland Muslim Family Association and the Belfast Islamic Centre have been working alongside colleagues from other faith communities in Northern Ireland to lobby for changes to the Northern Ireland Assembly's plans for promoting good relations. The government's plans were published in the consultation document "Cohesion, Sharing and Integration" and included no reference to the need to develop inter faith activities. There has been a very active campaign to highlight the need to include support for inter faith activities. This campaign culminated in a submission by the Northern Ireland Inter Faith Forum. The submission is available at www.niinterfaithforum.org/.
20. Interfaith week is organised in November every year
21. Interfaith Family Week - 30th May to 5th June
22. Multi Faith Group for Healthcare Chaplaincy (MFGHC)

23. The Muslim Council of Britain has played a pro-active role in the development of inter faith work in healthcare chaplaincy since 1997.

What can schools, colleges and universities do?

24. As part of its objectives to promote the common good, Al-Muntada initiated, **Discover Islam** is an educational organisation based in London dedicated to peace, harmony and goodwill through a holistic knowledge of Islam. Discover Islam promotes a better understanding about Islam in inter faith panels for secondary schools .

25. School visits by religious leaders can be a great inspiration for pupils and staff and an opportunity for community cohesion, better still Insets for the school staff will promote understanding of the others faith.

Interfaith groups tackling climate change

26. Active participation with the Christian-Muslim Youth Statement on Climate Change, drawn up in Lambeth Palace and organised by CMF.

27. When the world leaders came to an agreement to cut carbon emissions at the UN Climate Change Summit in Copenhagen, MADE in Europe launched a project to keep climate change on the agenda. A group of young Christians and Muslims developed their own mini climate change campaigns to inspire local people in their communities to take action. Volunteers came up with creative campaigns such as the "Think Local" campaign which aimed to raise awareness among school children about how transport emissions contribute to climate change

United in Sport

28. Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra and Canon Michael Ainsworth (rector from the St-George-in-the-East Church) have been organising football and cricket matches between Imams and clergy.

29. The Bolton Council of Mosques organises annual Inter faith football competition for young people of all faiths;

30. The Karimia institute's youth dept. Organise annual multi faith football tournament in cooperation with the Nottingham interfaith council.

Inter faith Iftar Gathering

31 During the month of Ramadan Muslims fast and this provides an ideal opportunity to hold an Inter Faith Iftar gathering, at the time of breaking the fast, eating together as well learning about fasting in different religions.

Inter faith exchange trips

32. In July 2009, the Tower Hamlets inter faith forum and MCB took a group of people from different faiths and backgrounds on an exchange trip to Bosnia. Mr Hassan commented that "This journey surely reaffirmed my belief that the survival of humanity is in respecting each others' culture and faith. Prior to my Bosnia visit, I was involved in inter faith activities but I am adamant to speed up my input in community cohesion by meeting people from different faiths and arranging meetings where people can express and share their true feelings.

33. Karimia Institute and a local Christian charity are organising an exchange trip to Bosnia in October 2011, a group of Christian and Muslim youth will visit Bosnia.

34. Improving international relations in particular between the west and the Muslim world, CMF organised a seminar to discuss the relations between west and Iran.

Sharing the pulpit

35. A young interfaith worker, Karem Issa, was invited to give the Sunday sermon at Blackburn Cathedral with a Catholic colleague on multi-faith action and global poverty.

36. In Nottingham since 2000, Christian and Muslims have been coming together on Good Friday to pray for the suffering in the world, this is what happens: Local Christians walk in procession carrying the cross, they stop outside the mosque, since it is Friday Muslim worshippers in the mosque come out and greet the Christians. Then the Imam and the Vicar both take turns to read an agreed prayer this lasts about ten minutes and the Christians carry on with their procession and the Muslims return to the Mosque. This has helped to create positive feelings on both sides.

37. The Inter Faith Leadership Development Programme is to help develop leadership across the faith communities in Bolton and to allow faith leaders to learn and come together over a period of four months. (Bolton Council of Mosques)

Statements and acts of solidarity

38. Condemning extremists and their acts of terrorism. One of the most significant contributions of Inter faith work was in the immediate aftermath of the 7th July 2005 London Bombing. The East London Mosque along with various faith leaders came together and issued a joint statement condemning the bombing as well as urging all that this horrific incident should not divide our communities.

39. Faiths in action Nottingham organised a memorial for the victims of the 7/7 bombing by releasing 56 balloons

40. The Christian Muslim forum often responds to local, national and international events that may impinge on the relations of the two faiths. It reflects the views of its members, for example its joint statements on issues of public concern relating to the two faiths (e.g. 'Christmas For All' in 2006 – a statement showing Muslim support for the celebration of Christmas and 'No Go Areas of the Mind' – a statement challenging the Bishop of Rochester's assertion that some Muslim communities are no go areas for Christians);

41. Newsletters, most local interfaith groups publish occasional newsletters about the future events, articles on interfaith, about different faiths, uplifting stories etc.

42. Websites, an inexpensive way of spreading good news about interfaith work

Open letters and calls to more dialogue

43. I am one of the 500 signatories of this wonderful international Muslim initiative that calls upon the followers of Christianity and Islam to live together in peace. It invites Muslims and Christians to adopt two foundational principles of their faiths love of the one God, and love of the neighbour, as they are the two most often repeated principles in the sacred texts of Islam and Christianity.

44. The Vatican's positive response..

45. The Archbishop of Canterbury's response

46. An open letter: a call to dialogue and understanding between Muslims and Jews. This is an excellent example of a Jewish organisation initiating a process of dialogue. Dr. Kessler, its author, said; this is an appeal and a hand held out, based on the teachings of both the Qur'an and the Hebrew Bible, in a genuine desire for dialogue and mutual respect; "turn from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it" Psalms 34:14

And the servants of the Merciful are those who walk on the earth humbly and when the ignorant confront them they reply "peace" 25:65

Interfaith prayers

47. Balham Mosque and representatives of the Jewish, Christian and Hindu religions were represented at the Putney Vale Cemetery and Crematorium's annual multi faith memorial service to commemorate family, friends and loved ones who have passed away.

48. Visiting places of worship with aim of getting to know local places of worship

49. Peace walk, this is a common event organised by local interfaith councils to encourage members of different faiths to get together to say prayers and to read from the scriptures, the aim is to show unity and solidarity as people of faith

Social gatherings and sharing meals

50. This is a growing event amongst the interfaith enthusiasts, families cook their food and bring it to a venue and different groups share and enjoy each others company

51. Family seminar to discuss family issues for Muslims and Christians, where the importance of relationships between parents and children and God is discussed.

Interfaith groups are a resource for public bodies

52. Sometimes they provide vital training for understanding different faiths, through awareness raising like "Religious Literacy Awareness" for Journalists organised by CMF

Women's meetings and events

54. There are several groups of Muslim and Christian women only meetings, this is a good development as it allows those women to participate in interfaith who otherwise would feel uncomfortable in a mixed gathering.

55. Women organise fund raising events, through talent shows, for Haiti and Palestine

56. Women healthy cooking group

57. Women tackling domestic violence

58. Women running multifaith allotments for growing vegetables

59. Women's support asylum seekers .

60. Christian and Muslim women's spiritual retreat, local interfaith groups are an invaluable resource for hospitals, prisons, probation service, police, fire and rescue and even the education department. Women at the well is a good example of such retreat organised by the Christian Muslim forum.

Promoting good community relations

61. Most interfaith work is about enhancing the community relations, however, some work alongside the racial equality councils to actively promote positive race relations. A good example is the "Interfaith Kirklees".

Dialogues of academics and religious leaders

62. Christian Muslim forum organised a special symposium for academics to discuss different aspects of interfaith

63. The imams and ministers conference

Individuals as champions of interfaith

Like Dr. Bell there are many champions of interfaith in Britain, the two young Muslims I have selected as examples give us hope of even a brighter future for interfaith work.

Karem Issa loves the interfaith work as a faith volunteer, Karem has really got stuck in it!

64. Recruiting and training a multi-faith team of volunteers who organised a range of fundraising and awareness events about malaria.

65. Leading a group of young British Muslims to the Jewish Christian Muslim (JCP) Inter faith Conference March 2009, in Wuppertal, Germany.

66. Conducted a speaker tour of six Bosnian towns in March 2010, organised by the Islamic Leadership in BiH, presenting on the topic of "Muslims in the UK and Multi-faith Cooperation".

67. Involved in drawing up the Muslim-Christian Local Encounter Letter to imams and priests at Lambeth Palace, July 2010.

68. Currently planning an inter faith trip to Ghana for community leaders in the UK. Similar to Karem there is Zeenat Azmi, working to bridge the communication gap through drama and art. She described her work as follows:

69. I have taken part in some innovative inter faith projects in Manchester, bridging the gap in communication between Muslim and Jewish communities through creative means. I was a member of the Muslim Jewish Youth Theatre at the Royal Exchange theatre as part of the 'In Place of War' project, in which we spent weekly drama workshop sessions learning to trust and understand each other and examine new perspectives.

70. From this platform we went on to learn more about our faiths, inviting each other for religious gatherings and developing new creative projects; artwork, craft markets and raising funds for the Artsbridge institute that promotes dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian children through art.

Sources

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5. The message of the Qur'an by Muhammad Asad, The book foundation, England